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Refugees Without A Country Find A New Home In The Lone Star State

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Refugees Without A Country Find A New Home In The Lone Star State

by

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Report

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Dedication

I dedicate this report to my dear grandfather who passed away ten years ago. Thank you for always encouraging me to follow my dreams and thank you for being my role model! We miss you.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank Mohamad Hussain, Mohamed Zalar, Hami Dulla, Be Bareket, Hajida Dulla and Hamzah Dulla for letting me into their life and telling me about their personal stories for the past six months. I am always grateful for the trust they have placed on me.

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In addition, I would like to thank my parents for raising me and giving me the opportunity to study abroad and to see the outside world.

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Abstract

Refugees Without A Country Find A New Home In The Lone Star State

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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About 620,000 Rohingya -- a predominantly Muslim ethnic group -- have fled violence in Myanmar this year in Asia's worst refugee crisis in decades – an operation that U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson described as "ethnic cleansing" in November. The stories of Rohingya persecution are familiar to Mohamad Hussain, 40, who lives in a one-bedroom apartment on East Rundberg Lane with two other men from Rakhine. One of them is Hami Dulla, 43, who is raising two children with his wife, Baraket Be, 33. The couple met at the Umpiem Mai Refugee Camp in Thailand, about 7 miles from the Myanmar border. Also living with them is Mohamed Zalar, 52, who is under medical treatment for bone disease and diabetes. A father of four, Zalar has been separated from his wife for 14 years.

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Mohamad Hussain walks home after finishing his work at 11:00 pm on September 12, 2017. Hussain says he never feels unsafe to walk home at night.

Wearing an orange shirt with the word “faith” on it, Mohamad Hussain, 40, deftly flipped the flatbread with both hands in the kitchen of an Indian and Pakistani restaurant. It was 11:00 pm. After making naan for about 10 hours, Hussain could finally go home.

The traffic noise had died down on Rundberg Lane in North Austin. After getting off the route 275 bus, Hussain quickened his pace as he walked home. Normally, he has the company of Hami Dulla, 43, his coworker and roommate. But Dulla had left work early that day.

Home is a one-bedroom apartment where Hussain lives with Mohamed Zalar, 52, and Dulla’s family of four. Hussain and Mohamed sleep on mattresses in the living room

floor, leaning them against the wall during the day. Dulla, his wife and two children sleep in the bedroom.

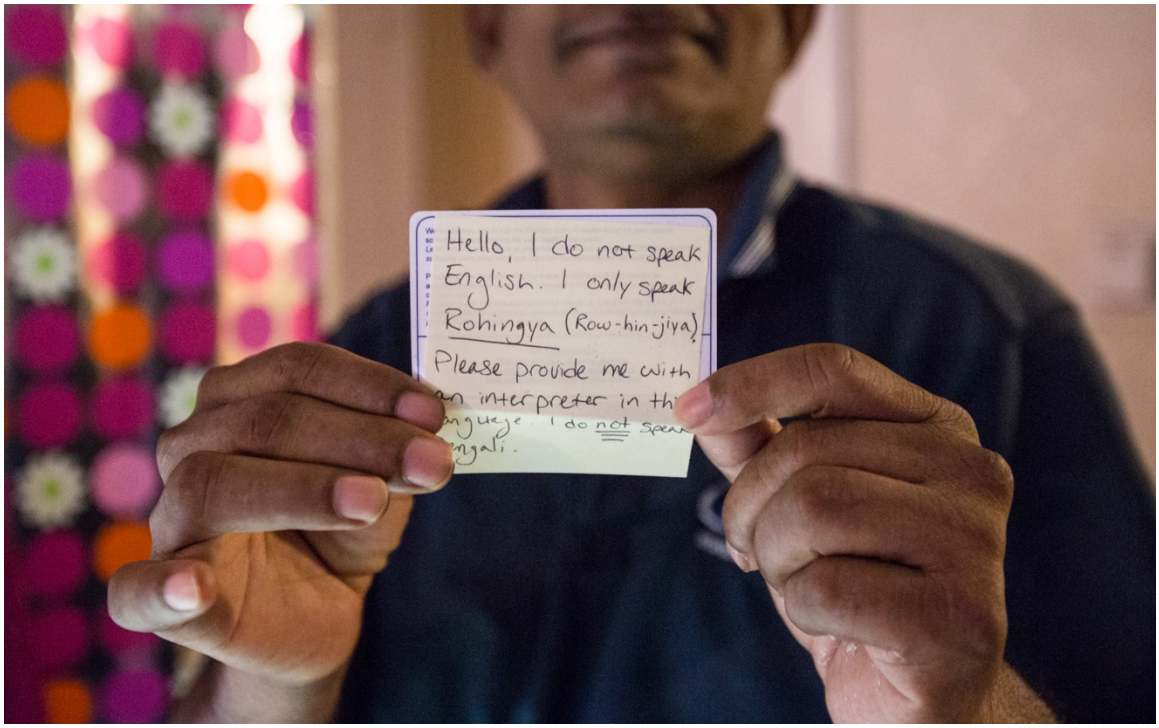
Mohamad Hussain, left, Mohamed Zalar, center, and Hami Dulla prepares lunch in the kitchen on July 28, 2017.

Hussain met his roommates at the Umpiem Mai refugee camp in Thailand, about 7.5 miles from the Myanmar border. The three men are Rohingya people from Rakhine State on the western coast of Myanmar.

Dulla also met his wife, Bareket Be, 33, at the camp. She is a Burmese Muslim but not Rohingya.

Described by the United Nation as one of the world's most persecuted minorities, the Rohingya are a predominantly Muslim ethnic group in the majority Buddhist Myanmar. The government consider them "resident foreigners," and they do not have freedom of movement, access or higher education or the ability to hold public office. A

1982 law denies them citizenship, even though many have lived for generations in the country.



Mohamed Zalar shows the note written on the back of his Medicare card in November, 2017.

The situation reached a crisis level in August, after some Rohingya militants attacked police posts and killed 12 members of the security forces. The response was a brutal crackdown that has included killings, rapes and the burning of hundreds of villages. An estimated 1,000 Rohingya, including children, have been reportedly killed as of early September, according to the UN.

More than 600,000 Rohingya, out of a total 1.1 million, have fled to makeshift refugee camps in Bangladesh. Senior UN officials have accused the Myanmar government of "ethnic cleansing," a charge the government denies.

"Every time I watch the news from my hometown, I want to cry," said Hussain. "Why human beings do such things to each other? What is the problem?"

In the U.S. there are about 12,000 Rohingya, but no more than 10 in Central Texas, according to Chris Kelly from Refugee Services of Texas, a nonprofit that helps refugees get settled in Texas.

Mohamad Hussain, right, waits for the bus on August 11, 2017. Every Friday, he would take the bus to pray in the nearby mosque before going to work at 1pm.

Hussain came to America in 2015 through the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. He does not remember his exact birthday. The UN refugee agency assigned him a birthday on his ID card: Jan 1, 1977. The recent news reports remind him of his own two-decade journey as a man without a country.

Mohamad Hussain takes the bus to pray in the nearby mosque before going to work at 1pm on August 11, 2017.

When Hussain was 14 years old, Burmese soldiers caught him on his way to school. The soldiers threw his backpack into the jungle and asked him to carry a heavy weapons box for them.

"I told them I cannot carry and I cannot go with them because I have an exam tomorrow," said Hussain.

But the soldiers beat Hussain with guns, leaving him with no choice but to do what they demanded. A week later, he escaped from a military camp at night when the soldiers got drunk and fell asleep.

Hussain ran home but his parents told him to leave immediately, because the soldiers were trying to find him. He left his hometown on the coast of the Bay of Bengal by ship. That was the last time that Hussain saw his parents.

After a brief stay in Yangon, the country's capital, Hussain arrived in Pattani, a border town in South Thailand, and then crossed into Malaysia. He settled in Kuala Lumpur and worked as a dishwasher at a restaurant where he learned Malay, Indonesian, Urdu, and some English.

In 2008, Malaysian immigration officers arrested him, because it was illegal for Hussain to work in Malaysia. Malaysia is not among the countries that are signatories to the 1951 international convention on refugees and does not allow them to work.

He was held in an immigration detention center for three months.

"The situation was really bad," said Hussain. "There were a lot of insects and bugs. I could not sleep at night."

Immigration authorities bused Hussain and others to a jungle border city in Thailand. When he arrived, human traffickers were waiting for him. He saw that everybody lived in a big tent and many were severely sick. They asked Hussain if he had money or relatives in Malaysia.

"They told me if I want go back to Myanmar, this price, and you go back to Malaysia, this price," said Hussain. "They told me if I cannot give money, I cannot go."

After some twists and turns, Hussain ended up in another detention center and then in Mae Sot, a city in western Thailand that shares a border with Myanmar. He lived and worked at a mosque for some time, then decided to go to the nearby Umpiem Mai refugee camp. At the camp, Hussain lived in a Rohingya family's home and worked for UNHCR as farmer at the camp, where he met Zalar and Dulla's family.

Baraket Be, center, has dinner with her sister, two children, and husband Hami Dulla on September 19, 2017. Be used to work as food preparer at Austin–Bergstrom International Airport from 3:00 am to 2:00 pm but quit her job recently due to her health problems.

Another seven years passed before Hussain was eventually approved to be resettled to a third country. The UNHCR officers asked him if he had any preference, and he said no.

"They asked me if I could go to America," said Hussain. "I said yes, of course."

Hussain's father died in 1993 when he was in Malaysia and his mother passed away in 2008 while he was in Thailand. The rest of the family is spread out – he has one brother in Saudi Arabia, one sister and one brother in Bangladesh, two sisters and two brothers in Myanmar.

"America has been very good for me," said Hussain. "I love you so much, America! I am independent now."

Hami Dulla, left, and Mohamad Hussain, right, work at an Indian and Pakistani restaurant in North Austin on July 28, 2017. Dulla is the dishwasher while Hussain is the bread maker.

At the North Austin apartment, Hussain is the only adult who speaks English. Dulla's children, Hajida 6, who is in first grade, and Hamzah, 8, a third grader, are learning English but cannot translate effectively for their parents.

At the restaurant, Dulla washes dishes for almost 10 hours a day. His wife, Be, used to work as a food preparer at the Austin airport, but had to quit recently because of health problems. She now does the grocery shopping and cleans and cooks for everyone in the household. They have an aging Honda and she is the only adult with a driver's license.

Baraket Be drives to pick up her husband Hami Dulla from work on October 12, 2017. Be arrived in America with her two children and her extended families in 2013.

The family has a support group: Many of Be's relatives live here, including her mother and some of her sisters.

Be holds on to some Burmese customs, including using thanakha, a yellow beauty paste made from ground tree bark, on her face. She puts it on her daughter's face as well. The paste is said to be good for the skin.

Originally from Karen State in Southeastern Myanmar, Be ended up in the Thailand refugee camp due to the armed conflicts between Karen people and Myanmar government. Both of her children were born at the refugee camp in Thailand. In 2013, U.N. resettled them to Austin.

Hajida Dulla, 6, puts on thanaka, a traditional Burmese beauty paste, before going to school on October 18, 2017.

Hajida and Hamzah both go to Hart Elementary School and also attend a nearby religious school, where they study the Quran in a class of 20 to 30 kids.

Hamzah says his favorite subject at school is science because he can do experiments.

Hamzah Dulla looks into the mirror as he applies some hair gel after getting up around 6 am on October 18, 2017.

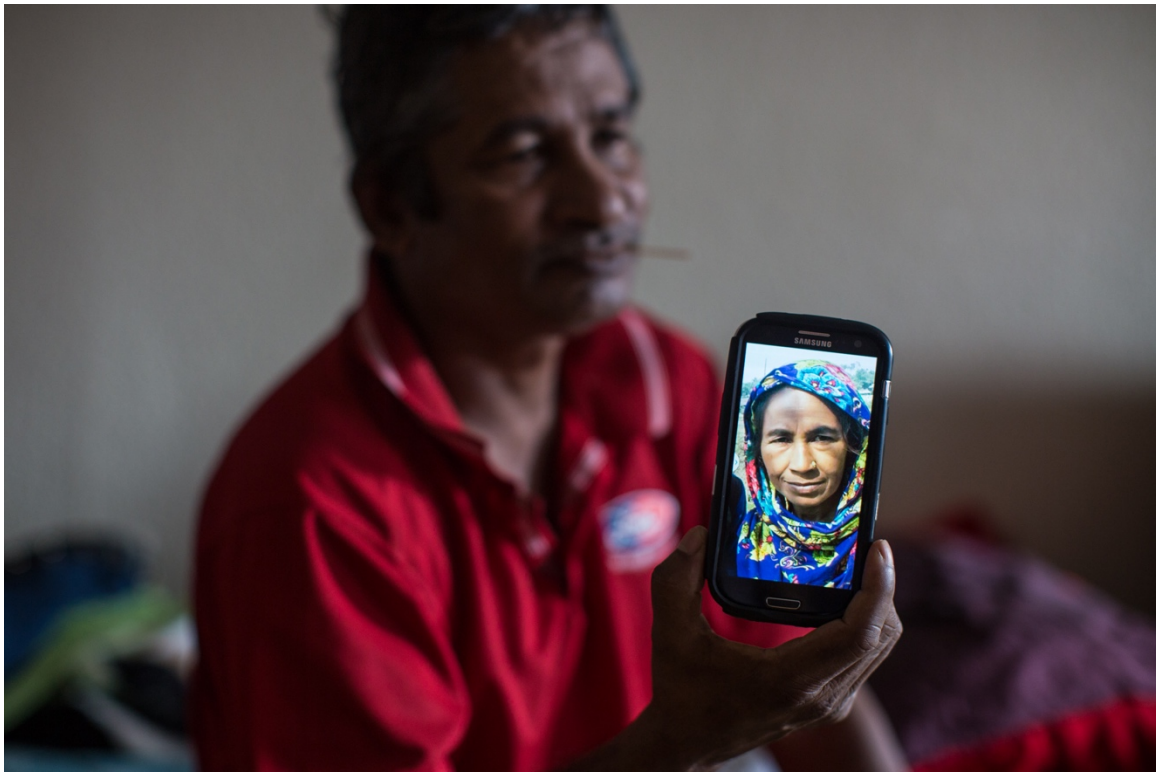
"I want to be a doctor in the future," said Hamzah. "Because I want to take care of my mom."

His sister said her favorite subject is music and that she would like to be a teacher when she grows up.

No one in the household can read English, and the family is confused by the letters they get from government agencies on issues such as applying for health care for the children. One recent letter they needed to provide an additional document for coverage, but the deadline already had expired.

Hami Dulla, center, and Mohamad Hussain, right, check out the blood glucose meter that Mohamed Zalar, left, got from his medical doctor on November 11, 2017. Zalar needs to monitor his blood glucose everyday due to his diabetes.

The older man in the household, Zalar, cannot work because he has diabetes and bone diseases. With the help from Refugee Services of Texas, Zalar now sees a doctor every month with an interpreter. But he is often confused by the directions on his prescriptions and isn't sure how often he should take some of the pills. He spends most of the day lying on his mattress and watching Indian films on television.



Mohamed Zalar shows the photo of his wife who now lives in Bangladesh with their four children on September 22, 2017. They have been separated from each other for 14 years.

Zalar was once a fisherman in Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State. He is married and has four children, but they have been separated for 14 years. His wife and kids now live in the Bangladeshi city of Cox's Bazar, where most Rohingya have sought refuge. When he left his hometown, his daughters were in grade school and now they are in their 20s. Thanks to the internet, they can talk and share photos with their cellphones.

Mohamed Zalar shows the scars on his right leg inflicted by the Myanmar government soldiers on August 4, 2017.

"He says he's not very happy because his family is not here with him," said Hussain, who translated for Mohamed.

In January, Mohamed plans to apply for a visa for his family to visit him.

Hussain has bigger ambitions. He said he wants to work and make more money, then find someone to marry.

He said it doesn't matter what her religion is.

"I am still young and I don't want to live alone," said Hussain.

Mohamad Hussain prays towards northeast around 9:00 pm at the restaurant he works for on November 14, 2017. Hussain says he wants to get married in the future and it does not matter what religion she is.

Hajida Dulla, 6, picks up her father Hami Dulla from work with her mother on October 12, 2017. Hajida currently goes to Hart Elementary School as first grader.

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